

Chapitre IX

THE NOTION OF REVELATION

From Ahl al-Kitâb to the Societies of the Book *

BY

MOHAMMED ARKOUN

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"It befitted not to a man that God should address him except by *Wahy* or from behind a veil, or should send a messenger who would "reveal" (*awḥa*) what he will... Thus, we revealed to you (Muḥammad) a spirit from our affair".

Qur'ânâ, 42, 51-52

Religions are systems of beliefs, convictions and knowledge which are still dominating and regulating the existence of many societies. The case of islam is especially important, since the well-known revolutionary movements associated with it are producing impressive events in the name of God and His teachings. Dealing with Revelation according to the *Qu'ân* and the Muslim Tradition in present circumstances, is a very delicate task. In Christianity, Revelation is a subject for only a few theologians; it has a historical, cultural interest, but it does not raise collective emotions and violent reactions, as it does in Muslim societies. Here, if any change, any issue settled by the official orthodoxy, is introduced, emotions are aroused.

I must stress from the beginning that this difference in attitude towards Revelation is not related to substantial, original, or even functional characteristics of Revelation in Christianity and Islam. Rather, the

difference is to be found in the historical rhythm of evolution in the societies still qualified as "Muslim" and in those which are no longer described as Christian since the phenomenon of secularization has imposed the cultural and historical concept of the West. We shall to these decisive issues as we work out the concept of "the societies of the Book". First, we have to find the vocabulary, methods, and intellectual attitudes relevant to the presentation of the notion of Revelation in the *Qur'ân* and in classical Islamic thought. While doing so, we must be careful that we do not become prisoners of the dogmatic, so-called "orthodox" positions. In other words, we need to submit the fundamental teachings of Muslim Tradition to 1) the requirements of modern historical analysis, 2) the philosophical evaluation of the implicit or explicit postulates of these teachings, and 3) the benefit of modern rationality and scientific thought through the example of islam not yet integrated in the new methodologies and scientific concerns.

If we succeed in this reevaluation of Revelation as a central issue in Muslim Tradition, we will undoubtedly discover new horizons in our approach to the concept of Revelation in the Jewish and Christian traditions as well. We can then move intellectually, culturally, and historically from the vision of "the peoples of the Book" to the concept of "the societies of the Book".

I - REVELATION IN THE QUR'AN

We need a new intellectual strategy with which to approach the notion of Revelation in Muslim Tradition, and in other rich traditions developed and stratified during many centuries of cultural, ideological practice. In developing this new strategy, we must carefully examine the traditional sources in order to dismiss, first of all, the central concept of orthodoxy. *Orthodoxy* is defined as the system of beliefs and mythological representations through which, and with which, a given social group perceives and produces its own history. Furthermore, each group is in competition with other groups, either to enlarge the scope of its domination, or to protect itself from the attacks of "imperialist" movements. In this context, orthodoxy can also be defined as *the system of values which functions primarily to guarantee the protection and the security of the group*. That is why any orthodoxy is necessarily an ideological vision overwhelmingly oriented toward the subjective interest of the group to

which it belongs. But the group considered as a "collective consciousness" is *never* aware of its subjective, biased use of history; it sees its "orthodoxy" as a genuine expression of its identity. At the same time, competing groups develop their own "orthodoxy" which is considered as an heresy by the dominant group, or the official definition of "true religion". From a sociological point of view, we cannot share the theological or political criteria used by the group in power to dismiss the other manifestations of ethno-cultural identities.

This concept of orthodoxy is clearly illustrated in all the heresiographic literature written by Muslims during the classical period. The majority of Muslims who accepted the rule of the Umayyads and the Abbasids, called themselves "the People of Tradition and Community" (*Ahl al-Sunna wal Jamâ'a*), those who follow the authentic Tradition (*Qur'ân* and *Hadîth*) and adhere to the true Muslim community through consensus. The Sunnites refer to the opposing sects as "those who refuse the true tradition" (*Rawafid* = *Shi'a*), while *Shi'a* call themselves "the People of Infallibility and Justice" (*Ahl al-'isma wal-'adala*) and reject totally corpuses of traditions claimed by the Sunnites.

Modern historians know very well these oppositions and competitions, but they do not consider their consequences if one approaches the phenomenon of Revelation beyond the arbitrary uses and interpretations made, imposed by each group claiming the monopoly of "orthodox" religion.

Here we have to touch some key issues which have been declared taboo by the official orthodoxy at least since the tenth century. The traditional, orthodox conception of Revelation - as it is currently used in all Islamic religious sciences, and as it is reported in all books, especially the exegetic literature - can be summarized in the following propositions:

- 1) God has communicated His will to mankind (His human creatures) through the prophets. To do this, He used human languages that people could understand, but He articulated the sentences in His own syntax, rhetoric, and vocabulary. The task of the prophets, such as Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, was only to utter a discourse revealed to them by God as a part of His uncreated, infinite, co-eternal Speech - this was the orthodox theory in islam in contrast to an opposite theory developed by the Mu'tazilites, earlier, on God's created Speech.

- 2) The tradition insisted on the rôle of the angel Gabriel as the intermediary instrument between God and the Prophet Muḥammad.

- 3) The Revelation given in the *Qur'ân* through Muḥammad is the ultimate one; it completes the previous revelations made to Moses and

Jesus, and it corrects the altered texts (*tahrîf*) of the Bible (*tawrât*) and the Gospels. It contains all that humans need to organize their terrestrial lives in the perspective of the eternal life (legal and ethical norms, true knowledge, rituals and ceremonies, representations of the cosmos, etc.).

4) The Revelation manifested in the *Qur'ân* is exhaustive for the needs of the believers (potentially all mankind), but it does not exhaust the entire *Word of God* preserved in the Heavenly Book (*Umm al-Kitâb*, the archetypal Book; *al-lawḥ al-maḥfûz*, the preserved Table).

5) The concept of the Heavenly Book presented so strongly in the *Qur'ân*, is one of the ancient symbols of the common religious *imaginaire* of the ancient Middle East, as is clearly shown in the still-valid studies of Geo Widengren (*Muḥammad, the Apostle of God and His Ascension*, Uppsala 1955; and *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book*, Uppsala, 1950). We shall come back to this point later, because it has not been incorporated frequently or accurately enough into the classical theory of Revelation.

6) The collection of the *Qur'ân* into a physical, commonly used book (*Muṣḥaf*), conditioned entirely by imperfect human procedures (e.g., oral transmission; use of an imperfect graphic form; conflicts between clans and parties; positions of the Compagnons (*ṣaḥâba*); and unreported readings) did not prevent the elaboration of the theory of God's uncreated speech, of an exhaustive Revelation given in the *Qur'an*, and of a direct authentic human access to this transcendental, divine speech.

These propositions imply the coexistence of two levels of Revelation, well articulated in the mind of the believers, but intellectually and practically differentiated.

The first is the level of the Word of God related to the Heavenly Book guaranteeing the authenticity and the transcendence of the manifested book (the *Muṣḥaf* constituted after the Caliph 'Uthman (656)). The second is the level of Islamic science and literature produced by the successive generations of '*Ulamâ*' - jurists, theologians, exegetes, moralists, and sufis, traditionists who have built the multiple corpuses of the Muslim tradition in its three main lines: Sunnites, Shî'ites and Khârijites.

The idea that Revelation is totally given by God and has been sent down (*tanzîl*) to the people through prophets (and angels), that the verses were in Arabic are the original words of God referring to objects, beings, worlds, ontologically rooted in the creative initiative of God and in His choice of names (God, thus, taught Adam all the names, as he did in the book of Genesis), this idea of Revelation penetrating, illuminating, giving meaning to all concrete realities, became for Jews, Christians and Mus-

lims the central organizing representation, dominating the whole history of the societies touched by this idea. In that sense, these societies are the *societies of the Book* : produced by and on the basis of the Book in its two levels - the heavenly Book which corresponds in the Christian language to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the manifested, physical book (the Bible, the *Qur'ân*, the Gospels) containing the authentic Word of God.

Here we must clarify a point of theology. Christians refuse the assimilation of the Bible or the *Qur'ân* to Jesus Christ, just as Muslims refuse to assimilate the divine status of the *Qur'ân* to the human status (and authorship) of the Bible and the Gospels. These distinctions have great importance for the configuration of the psychological structure of the religious *imaginaire* in each community. When I say *imaginaire* I do not want to dismiss from any rationalist point of view, the source of knowledge used in each religious tradition. I wish, on the contrary, to introduce an anthropological category to explain how perception of realities, and all the subsequent language used to refer to these realities, is permanently and radically *in-formed*, shaped, and governed by the key representations derived from various interpretive readings of the Word of God. For example, Jesus Christ, as the incarnate Word of God, is homologue to the *Mushaf* in Muslim representation and to the written *Torah* in Jewish tradition.

This homology of the concrete supports in which the Word of God has been incarnated is strengthened by a more decisive and cultural fact : Whatever is the original support of the initial Revelation, the oral discourse pronounced initially by the mediator between God and mankind has been written down on parchment or paper to become a *book* which I open, read, and interpret. This book itself has become the "Holy Scriptures", which means that it has been sanctified by a number of rituals, discursive strategies, and methods of exegesis related to many concrete, and known - or knowable - political, social, and cultural circumstances.

Many problems are involved in this transformation of the Word of God (represented in God's speech itself as being eternal, transcendent, infinite, and unreachable by any human effort) into a physical book, sanctified scriptures, sanctified law (Canon law and *Shari'a*), sanctified ethics, and transcendent knowledge.

Before we move on to the successive transformations in the Muslim tradition, let us take more evidence from the *Qur'ân* about the notion of Revelation, which will be manipulated later by the '*Ulamâ*' of all levels and for all kinds of purposes.

Revelation in the *Qur'ân* is at first a result of linguistic evidence : the

syntactic, semantic, semiotic structure of the Qur'anic discourse imposes a space of communication totally articulated to impose a notion and a content of Revelation. I have already shown this in several essays; there is no need to repeat it here ⁽¹⁾. I shall take just one exemple to summarize the most important facts.

The *sûra* 96, *al-'alaq* (The blood clot):

XCVI

THE BLOOD CLOT

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created,
created Man of a blood clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen,
taught Man that he knew not.

Non indeed; surely Man waxes insolent,
for he thinks himself self-sufficient.
Surely unto thy Lord is the Returning.

What thinkest thou? He who forbids
a servant when he prays -
What thinkest thou? If he were upon guidance
or bade to godfearing -
What thinkest thou? If he cries lies, and turns away -
Did he not known what God sees?

No indeed; surely, if he gives not over,
We shall seize him by the forelock,
a lying, sinful forelock.
So let him call on his concourse!
We shall call on the guards of Hell.

No indeed; do thou not obey him,
and bow thyself, and draw nigh.

(trans. Arberry)

The major themes of Revelation are already suggested in this short *sûra*. God appears as the central subject, organizing grammatically and semantically the whole discourse. But there are two other protagonists: the prophet to whom the commandment is addressed, and man, the object and the final addressee of all the actions expressed by the numerous verbs. The grammatical structure of this *sûra* thus, indicates the personal relations between *we*, *thy*, *they*, or *he* which is the basic space of communication and meaning in the whole Qur'ânic discourse. All the themes, the meanings, and the situations developed over 20 years as God's speech - all are articulated within a strict hierarchy around these three persons: God is the ontological origin and the ultimate addressee of all existing creatures, activities, meanings, and events; the prophet is the mediator between God and man; man is the elected creature invited to submit his life to the creator. There is permanent tension between God (*we*) and man (*he*, *they*); Revelation is intended to invite and to guide man towards the Right Way, the way which leads to eternal salvation. The rebellion of man and his revolt against God are opposed to his obedience to the Commandments and Prohibitions fixed in the revealed speech. This is not a static dualist opposition, but a continuous dialectic tension through which a consciousness of culpability emerges. Man is then transformed into a subject of ethics and law responsible for each thought, each action, each initiative he produces in his life.

The process of transmitting God's speech to man also involves the angel Gabriel. According to the classical exegesis, the *sûra* 96 was the first revealed to the prophet. It is reported that Gabriel, the angel, identified with the spirit (*al-rûh*), brought this first revelation to Muḥammad on Mount Hira. He asked him three times, "Read (or preach) in the name of your Lord!" And Muḥammad answered "I do not know to read".

We have in this story a concrete example of the transmission of Revelation from God to the people. Gabriel is constantly going from God (the heaven) to Muḥammad (the earth) to bring revelations, just as he came to Jesus and other prophets in the Bible. Thus, Gabriel guarantees the authenticity of Revelation in the line starting with Adam and ending with Muḥammad.

The numerous narrations reported in the *Qışaş al-anbiyâ'* (narrations on the prophets), especially those collected by the two converted Jews, Ka'b al-Aḥbar and Wahb ibn Munabbih, provide the mythological background that explains the circumstances in which each verse or piece of the *Qur'ân* was revealed. These narratives show the strong relationship between the religious *imaginaire* which prevailed during the first three

centuries of the Hijra and the interpretations of the *Qur'ân*. The sense of the marvelous, as a psychocultural category, is displayed in all the narrations and projected on the Qur'anic discourse itself. Until today, the perception of Revelation has been dominated by this sense of the marvelous as a basic element of mythical knowledge (2).

A grammatical analysis is insufficient in demonstrating the ways in which Revelation has been imposed on the religious consciousness through linguistic and semiotic processes. For this, we must consider three more major points in the Qur'anic discourse:

- metaphoric organization;
- semiotic structure;
- intertextuality.

First, the role of metaphor and metonymy in religious language has not yet been fully considered up to now. I can, however, suggest two essays which emphasize the main lines of new research:

Paul Ricoeur: *La Métaphore Vive*, ed. Seuil, 1975 and

Northrop Frye: *The Great Code: The Bible and the Literature*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

The example of the *Qur'ân* has been particularly neglected because, until today, orthodox exegesis has been limited by the traditional definition of metaphor as a simple rhetorical device used to embellish style; the words always denote realities and the Word of God imposes a more substantial reality to the referees. Even the words leading to anthropomorphic interpretations like "God sat on the throne", "God taught by the Pen", and "God is the Hearer" are rather received in their proper meaning (3).

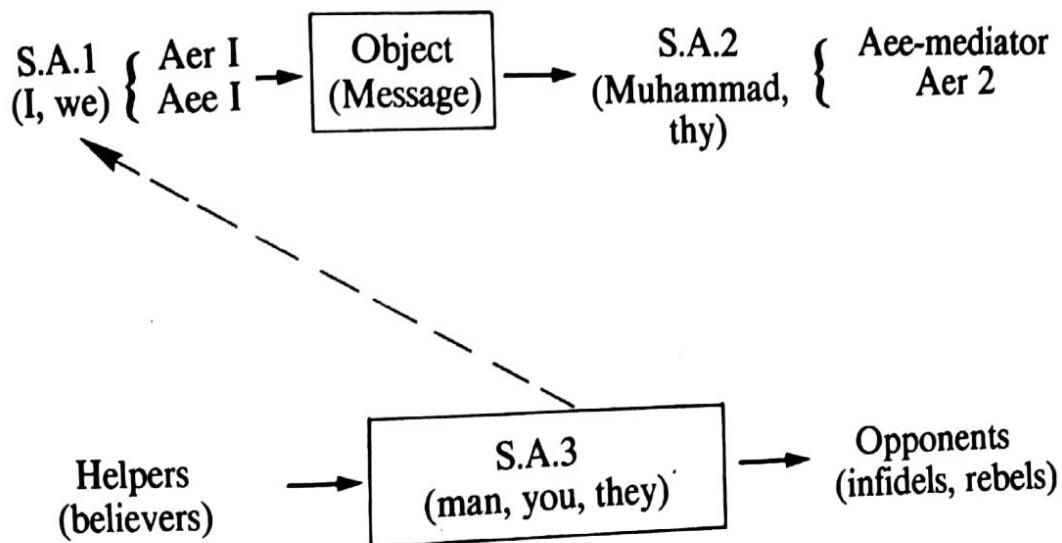
Philological studies by the Orientalists lack a fully elaborated theory of metaphor and metonymy. This is shown in many examples from Th. Nöldeke, R. Blachère, D. Masson, R. Paret, and others. This is not the place to go into this fully. Let me just point out the difficulty of interpreting expressions from *sûra* 96 like "Who taught by the *Pen*", "Did he not know that God sees?", "We shall seize him by the *forelock*, a lying, sinful forelock", and "the *guards of Hell*". How can we decide which of these phrases or words are metaphorical and which are to be taken literally? The esoteric tradition of interpretation (*bâṭiniyya*) has produced a tremendous body of literature about the *Pen*, God who *sees*, and *guards of Hell*; but this shows only how Qur'anic discourse has been and still can be used as a *pretext*, not a *text*. The lack of a clear theory of metaphor forces us to leave for the moment the decisive question of the metaphoric organization of the Qur'anic discourse.

Let us turn, then, to our second point which concerns the semiotic structure of the Qur'anic discourse. The entire discourse is dominated by a technique of persuasion. In semiotic terminology, we can say that each textual unit presents three steps:

- 1) Allah announces a judgment or delivers a message.
- 2) Some of those addressed by Allah refuse to listen to his message; some hear it and refuse to believe in it; some accept the message as knowledge, but refuse to follow it in worship and in daily life; and only a few fully accept the message - they are the believers, the party of God.
- 3) The Day of Judgment comes. The believers are rewarded with salvation, while the rebels are punished and rejected by God.

This dramatic structure has its social, political, and cultural base in Mecca and Medina, where some clans followed the prophet and others fought against him. The importance of the Qur'anic discourse is that it gave a paradigmatic semiotic structure to issues peculiar to the *Hijâz* society in the beginning of the seventh century.

This paradigmatic structure is represented in the following diagram:



Key to initials:
 S.A. = Subject Actant
 Aer = Addresser
 Ae = Addressee

One has to use the very abstract, technical terminology of semiotics, not for the sake of complexity or "Parisian mode", but in order to accomplish a specific intellectual task. To consider only the functions and

the protagonists that bring about an outcome through dramatic opposition, we need to entirely avoid the rich connotations our vocabulary has acquired over the centuries. This is the methodological condition for showing how God and Revelation exist in the special sphere of Qur'anic discourse - and similarly in the sphere of Biblical discourse, which has the same semiotic structure.

(For the explanation of these technical terms, I refer to Greimas (A.J.) et Courtes (J.): *Semiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Hachette, Paris, Vol. 1, 1979, Vol. 2, 1986).

As to our third point, our analysis of the semiotic structure shared by the Bible, the Gospels and the *Qur'ân*, sheds new light on the problem of influences studied so far by philologists using in the well known historical perspective. There are obvious and numerous themes, visions, names, and even concepts and texts that were used in the Bible and the *Qur'ân* with a new perspective and articulation of meaning. But it is not clear that even an understanding of this line of influence will lead to a sufficient appreciation of the extent to which the phenomenon of Revelation was shaped and manipulated in the ancient Near East to produce the three monotheistic systems of beliefs now known as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

We can see in *sûra* 18 (The Cave) an illuminating example of the wide intertextuality at work in the Qur'anic discourse. Three narrations (*The People of the Cave*, *The Gilgamesh Legend*, and *the Novel of Alexander the Great*), representing the most ancient cultural *imaginaire* common to the ancient Near East, are combined in a single same *sûra* to corroborate and illustrate the transmission of the message. In each of the narrations, which are strictly articulated in the basic semiotic structure described above, we see the emergence of the protagonist who received the Message, used its knowledge, and with it changed the ultimate significance of human existence as it relates to God and His teachings (4).

The narrations used in the *Qur'ân* make it clear that the mere enumeration of various influences is an insufficient method of uncovering the effective functions of the discourse as *a new starting cultural code* (nouveau départ de code) in the Arabic language, taking over a singular history of a particular social group (i.e., the Arabs in the Hijaz).

The concept of a new starting cultural code in a given language through the personal historical experience of a given social group, seems to be the core of any positive approach to the concept of Revelation, avoiding all theological or esoteric speculations. I summarized this line of research in my study on religion and society according to the example of islam (in *Pour une Critique de la Raison Islamique*, Paris, 1984, p.

193-248), by demonstrating the interaction among language, history and thought.

II - REVELATION IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Islamic thought is based on a style of scholarship and a number of disciplines developed by Muslims during the first four centuries of the Hijra. The Umayyads' foundation of a centralizing imperial state played a decisive role in "the formative period of Islamic thought", as Professor W.M. Watt called it. We must take into consideration this new political, social, and cultural situation in order to adequately explain the transformations and the manipulations of the notion of Revelation manifested in the Qur'anic discourse.

The Umayyad state was founded in Damascus in A.D.661 as the result of a violent confrontation between rival tribes. In our modern vocabulary, we would say that it is a "secularized" state. Muslims used the word *malik* (king) and *mulk* (kingdom) to distinguish this regime from the legitimate state run by the Caliph (Sunnites) or the Imam (Shi'ites). In order to gain legitimacy, the Umayyad state was careful to enforce Qur'anic "law". But the law not explicitly and completely defined in the *Qur'ân*; it had to be elaborated. That is why the *Qur'ân* was at first used by judges as a source of juridical decisions; this was the first step in the elaboration of the religious law (*Shari'a*) and in the constitution of a central discipline in Islamic thought (i.e., *fiqh*, strengthened later by the theoretical discipline called *Uşûl al-fûqh*).

The shift from the Qur'anic discourse to a juridical discourse resulted in a radical transformation of the notion of Revelation. Broadly speaking, we may say that judges, jurists, and theologians have exactly reversed the linguistic and semiotic process described in the Qur'anic discourse. That is, instead of using terrestrial, concrete history to create a mythical, symbolic vision of human existence, the pragmatic reading favored by the jurists ignored or eliminated the mythical, symbolic discourse in order to elaborate an explicit, denotative, normative code of rules for administrative and governmental purposes.

How did this misuse of the Qur'anic discourse become possible? And what are the consequences for the conception and the functions of Revelation?

The collection of the *Qur'ân* in a book called *Mushaf* is the central

issue. Muslim orthodoxy considered this fact only from the point of view of authenticity : it was necessary to impose the belief that the totality of the Revelation made through Muhammad was correctly transmitted by the companions and written down under the scrupulous supervision of reliable witnesses. Orientalism, with its philological method and historicist perspective, did not change the basic attitude of Muslims, but some Orientalists created a theological scandal when they raised doubts about the reliability of some transmitters and the mythical role attributed to personalities like Ibn 'Abbas. In fact, this critical approach is addressed to the orthodox vision imposed inside the Muslim Community after the tenth century; it does not touch the more essential issue on the Revelation as a linguistic, semiotic space at the disposal of the various categories of social actors; or, in other words, Revelation as a powerful instrument to produce the history of the societies.

I do not deny the necessity of studying problems of authenticity with philological methods; but this is one of the steps more detailed research in the more complex area of Revelation and its relation-ship to history and truth.

The constitution of the *Mushaf* was initiated and achieved under the will and the control of official authorities during the time of the Umayyads and the first Abbasids, the so-called "right-guided caliphs". Once the collection was finalized - in the time of 'Uthmân, according to the orthodox view - the corpus (*Mushaf*) was declared *closed* - not one word could be added, or removed, or even interpreted in a way slightly different from the one initially reported. A Science of the tolerated readings was taught (*qirâ'ât*) and those who proposed readings not included in the orthodox corpus were put on trial. To sum up all these historical and textual problems, I use the expression *Official Closed Corpus* (O.C.C.)

As a cultural fact, the O.C.C. has three fundamental implications:

- 1) The Qur'ânic discourse, initially uttered and used as an *oral* discourse, becomes a *text*. This transformation will bring about a number of radical changes, which must be considered by linguistics and semiotics;
- 2) The sacred character of this text will be extended to the book as the material receptacle and vehicle of the "Revelation";
- 3) The book as a cultural instrument will be the basis of another fundamental change in the societies of the Book, i.e. increasing role, and finally, the domination of *written learned culture* over the *oral folk culture*. This domination is related to the state, which will develop a need for official archives and historiography. This will, in turn, favor the emergence of a social group called '*Ulamâ*', the specialists in charge of the

exegesis of the holy texts, and the orthodox elaboration and use of law and beliefs.

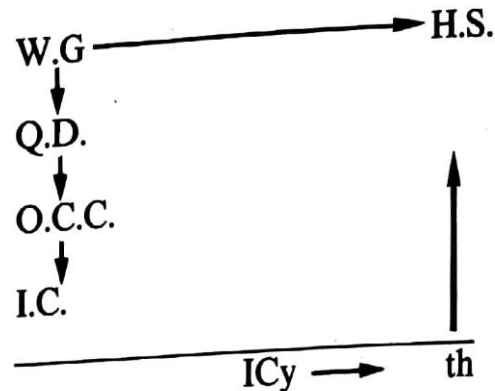
According to these new cultural, political, and social forces and needs, many secondary corpuses will appear in this historical process under the aegis of the phenomenon of the Book-book, which has to be differentiated from the phenomenon of Revelation. I call these secondary or derived corpuses the *interpreted corpuses* (I.C.). I do not refer only to the various commentaries of the *Qur'ân* produced down to our own day by the exegetes, for the corpus of traditions like the *Muwatta'* of Mâlik Ibn Anas, the *Kitâb al-Umm* of Shâfi'i, the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal, the *Ṣaḥîhân* of Bukhârî and Muslim, and the *Kâfi* of Kulaynî are also cultural expansions of the phenomenon of the Book-book, related itself to the phenomenon of Revelation.

I try to visualize a very elusive psychological and cultural process when I write *Book-book* with a capital and a small *b*. The many books produced as a cultural, intellectual activity responding to the demands of the official state and/or the civil societies are not separable from the collective, common representation of the Book as a heavenly Book in which the Word of God is preserved. In other words, the rationalist, logocentrist activity of reason in all kinds of books is more or less influenced, guided, and inspired by the activity of the *imaginaire* (*Vorstellung*) representing the mental image of the Book-Revelation.

I do not think that historians of Islamic thought (as well as of Christian and Jewish thought) and analysts of religious texts have pointed out this creative interaction between reason and *imaginaire* in all the societies of the Book. Here, this concept becomes clear and suggestive of possible investigations of the religious phenomenon.

The whole Community (*Umma*) is concerned with the phenomenon of the Book-book. Each member of the community is entitled to use - which means to interpret - texts selected from the O.C.C. This is done in everyday life according to the events and the sensitivity of each believer, who links a fragment of the *Qur'ân* (or the *Ḥadîth*) with some given, concrete circumstance. The Interpreting Community (ICy) is the subject-actant of the whole terrestrial history (*th*) represented, interpreted and used as a precarious stage to prepare the salvation according to the History of Salvation (*H.S.*) narrated by God as an educative part of Revelation.

All the concepts introduced so far can be diagrammed as follows:



W.G.	= Word of God
Q.D.	= Quranic Discourse
O.C.C.	= Official Closed Corpus.
I.C.	= Interpreted Corpuses
H.I.	= History of Salvation
ICy	= Intrepreting Community
th	= terrestrial history

We see the descending (*tanzîl*) movement of the Word of God and the ascending movement of the Interpreting Community toward Salvation according to the vertical perspective on all the creation, as it is imposed by the Qur'ânic discourse. Every believer shares this vision and expresses it in his worship, in his ethical behavior, and in his acceptance of the law. This individual relation to God is, at the same time, a social-political relation to the Community; the psychological function of the Revelation as a Message addressed to the *heart* (*qalb*) is inseparable from its social efficacy to transcend divisions and competitions, its legitimizing value for the political order.

There is another approach which elucidates these functions of the Revelation in Islamic thought. The revealed text preserved in the O.C.C. is commonly and regularly used as an infinite space for the *mental projection* of all the ideal types of perfect existence towards which believers aspire. Aspirations and hope for justice, love, peace, legitimate order, and eternal salvation are the universal needs developed by all religions in various forms of expression. In the particular cultural space of the Mediterranean world, these needs have been expressed and expanded with two interacting languages: the language of Revelation and the language of Greek philosophy (with its interacting Aristotelian-Platonic-

Plotinian lines). The theory of the intellect in medieval philosophy uses the same vertical view and the same ascending-descending movement that we have identified in the Revelation (5).

The concept of mental projection helps to demonstrate how the Qur'anic text is used as a *pretext*, not as a *text*, according to our modern linguistic and historical definitions. This means that the original Qur'anic text is rewritten, reproduced within the historical development of a given community (we should say, with more accuracy, of each society where the phenomenon of the Book-book is at work). Revelation is represented as a substantial, unchangeable, divine reality but, at the same time, it is manipulated according to the immediate, concrete needs of the social actors.

This semiotic, psychological, and ideological mechanism is made evident by the following examples:

1) The exegesis of the O.C.C., as it is illustrated in the great commentary of Tabari, has introduced many mythological narrations through which the Qur'anic text is read and interpreted. These narrations are literary elaborations with cultural elements borrowed from the common ancient legacy of the mythological memory of the Mediterranean area (and especially of the Middle East). Many examples of this reuse of ancient material can be found in the commentaries influenced by the *Isrâ'iliyyât* (6), narrative literature linked to the Sons of Isrâ'il. I have also mentioned the case of *sûra* 18.

2) The sciences of *Uṣûl al-fiqh* (the methodological and critical principles of jurisprudence) is an intellectual and "scientific" strategy used to enlarge the textual corpus of Revelation by appending the prophetic traditions (*Ḥadīth*) - and even the *imâmi* traditions (for the Shî'ites) - to the *Qur'ân*. Shâfi'i achieved this task in his famous *Risala*. At the same time, the *Uṣûl* provide the "scientific" evidence that all the juridical norms (*aḥkâm*) are correctly derived from the Revelation so that the Legislator is actually God and not any human authority. The doctors of the Law displayed their grammatical, semantic, and rhetorical knowledge of the Arabic language, their vast information on instrumental sciences like the circumstances of Revelation (*asbab al-nuzûl*), the abrogating and the abrogated verses (*al-nâsikh wal-mansûkh*), the logic specific to the jurisprudence, to show how human reason is the *servant* of the "Word of God" and to deepen the conviction that Revelation is enforced in the social, political, and ethical order. In fact, we have, with this construction, the illustration of a general attitude of reason in the societies of the Book: it is a reason producing an *imaginaire of rationality* with the assurance that it is

a very coherent, logical scientific reason.

Even today, Islamic thought accepts the science of *Usûl al-fiqh* in its mythological projective functions as an intellectual, "scientific" support of the religious character of Islamic law. A critical deconstruction of the notions and of the kind of rationality underlying this "science", is one of the essential steps in a modern reevaluation of the Revelation as a complex cultural and historical phenomenon. I am pleased to mention a recent contribution to this area by David S. Powers: *Studies in Qur'ân and Hadîth: The Formation of the Islamic Law of Inheritance*, U.C.P., 1986 (it needs a careful evaluation).

3) The theological exegesis (*'ilm al-kalâm*) is also a type of intellectual projection. All theologians - Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites, Imamites - used the instruments and procedures of a speculative reason (more or less influenced by Aristotelian rationalism) to transform the mythical, open, symbolic Qur'anic discourse into a logocentrist, conceptual, demonstrative system of beliefs and non-beliefs (*Usûl al-dîn*). The famous discussions on free will and predestination already illustrated in the first *Kalâm*, are the projections of a dualist logic on the spontaneous, creative existential expressions of the *Qur'ân*. From this point of view, the attitude of the Hanbali school, which refuses any rationalist questioning on the Word of God, and obediently receives the Revelation in its genuine expression "without asking how" (*bila kayf*), is more respectful of the mystery of God as it is suggested in the *Qur'ân* itself. (This, however, did not prevent the Hanbalites from having their own school of Law).

The *Zâhiri* school, represented in Al-Andalus by Ibn Hazm, offers an interesting strategy with which to conquer a domain where reason can freely exercise its sovereignty without any dogmatic control by theological juridical reason. The price to pay for this freedom and sovereignty is the total submission of the same reason to the literalist commandments and prohibitions of the sacred sources of law (*Qur'ân* and *Hadîth*).

The logocentrist trend of Islamic thought after the impact of Greek philosophy and science created a constant tension with the traditionalist and the esoteric trend. The well known division between the religious-traditional sciences and the rational-foreign sciences (*'ulûm dîniyya-naqliyya*/*'ulûm 'aqliyya-dakhîla*) is another expression of the rift caused by the same challenge: the hermeneutic situation created by the Revelation as a text, a hermeneutic situation common to the societies of the Book until philosophical and scientific reason established its independence and introduced the secularized model of history and thought.

4) A fourth example of the projective activity of Islamic thought

using the Qur'anic text as a pretext is provided by the well known mystic (*sūfi*) literature and, more generally, by the esoteric (*bātin*) as opposed to the literalist interpretation (*ẓāhir*).

Many studies have already shown the semantic and symbolic expansion of the Qur'anic vocabulary in *ṣūfī* literature. The creative imagination exemplified in the works of Ibn 'Arabī raises two major problems concerning the notion of Revelation. First, how can we explain the suggestive, inspiring force inherent to the Qur'anic discourse - the force which can give rise to a creative imagination like that displayed in the works of Ibn 'Arabī? This is jointly a problem of literary criticism and theology of Revelation. Second, how do we explain the disappearance, the irrelevance, the disintegration of and disregard for this same Qur'anic discourse - and, consequently, of Revelation - in the context of our secularized culture?

In other words, the *ṣūfī* expansion of religious discourse, and its irrelevance in the context of modernity, raises for the history of religious thought the difficult problem of the historicity - or the relative value and function - of Revelation itself. The reappraisal of Revelation as a linguistic fact and a projective process becomes unavoidable when we face - as we do here - the dialectic dynamism between Revelation, truth, and history.

5) A fifth and more striking example is found in the contemporary Muslim literature, with its apologetic, militant expansions since the 19th century. The colonial and imperialist impact on Muslim societies created an urgent need for psychological self-protection and ideological response. To face the challenge of modern science, some authors - like Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī in the 19th century and Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd today - have used the *Qur'ān* to "demonstrate" that all the scientific discoveries already had been announced in the revealed text. Similarly, it is claimed that socialist ideas, and democratic institutions were taught and applied in the time of the Prophet and the Companions. This mental projection of ideas and values desired and admired by the collective *imaginaire* today, reaches a wider popularity in the militant discourse of the Islamist movements presenting the *Qur'ān* as the "constitution" of the ideal modern state. With this trend, ideological manipulations of the religious texts dominate the spiritual dimension which was fundamental in *ṣūfī* literature and is still present even in some juridical exegesis.

This slight survey of the Revelation as a cultural, historical, and existential expansion in the Muslim tradition, leads to the following conclusions:

1) Revelation, as it is expressed in the Qur'anic discourse, proposes

ways, opens horizons, and stresses the need for the search for the absolute. At this stage, there is no systematization, no closed coherence, no rift between rational and mythical knowledge, but a pressing invitation to receive the Word of God as *signs-symbols* endlessly open for creatively emerging meanings.

2) The Islamic use of this Revelation confirms the role of the social-historical impact in the shaping of a message perceived nevertheless as a divine, transcendent, unchangeable, absolute Model of knowledge and action. Revelation operates on a double interrelated level: the religious *imaginaire* restricts itself to the representation of a divine, revealed Model which should be entirely, constantly incarnated in history; the reason applied to this *imaginaire*, unable to question it and to deconstruct it, finds practical solutions to corroborate the belief that the Model is performed, the will of God respected.

3) There is no way to find the absolute outside the social, political condition of human beings and the mediation of language. This trivial proposition has certainly been considered by many thinkers inside the system of knowledge and representations specific to the societies of the Book; but today, in the light of our modern, changing, pluralistic rationality, we consider new problems, new difficulties which have been *unthinkable* for the type of reason submitted to the "orthodox" view of Revelation.

4) The unthinkable in present Islamic thought is still more important than the thinkable. I do not point only to the taboos imposed by the "orthodox" tradition; I refer to all the challenges of the intellectual modernity which are emerging in some privileged places where free thinking and other necessary conditions are available.

III - FROM AHL AL-KITAB TO THE SOCIETES OF THE BOOK

A - *Ahl al-Kitâb*

All that has been said up to now is not sufficient for a modern reappraisal of the notion of Revelation. There are many convictions, beliefs, visions, and positions inherited from the traditional interpretations which still dominate the mutual perceptions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

I have chosen the rich concept of *Ahl al-Kitâb* to illustrate a pluralist

reading of the Revelation manifested in the *Qur'ân*, a reading that aims at the integration of aspects of tradition, levels of reality, methods of analysis, and horizons of knowledge often separated in the positivist, specialized activities of modern reason.

The *Ahl al-Kitâb* - People of the Book - are the Jews and Christians with whom Muḥammad had to deal in Mecca and Medina. They are mentioned in the *Qur'ân* as the possessors of the earlier Revelation, the believers who are favored by God in the same way as the Muslims, who have accepted the new Revelation. Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a pure "Muslim", a believer totally devoted to God. This perspective of spiritual history, or History of Salvation, is very clear in the *Qur'ân*, and it is an important dimension of a modern theology of Revelation.

But there is another presentation of *Ahl al-Kitâb* in the *Qur'ân*. Jews and Christians were opposed to Muḥammad and his claim to be a prophet, and they refused to accept the *Qur'ân* as the ultimate Revelation of the Word of God. Social and political tensions, along with an interesting symbolic competition, existed in Medina between *Ahl al-Kitâb* and the new community of believers. It is a great pity that we do not have enough documentation of the issues and the discussions to which we find only short allusion in the *Qur'ân*. *Ahl al-Kitâb* are assimilated to other people who went astray and are used to strengthen the uniqueness and the authenticity of a new Revelation. A new image of the Revelation is imposed: Jews and Christians have altered the scriptures, perverted their meaning (*tahrîf*); they do not follow the Law of God and they are uncircumcised in heart.

Through this religious polemics, a dogmatic definition of the Holy Scriptures is elaborated on the basis of the arguments exchanged in the political and cultural climate of Medina from 622 to 632. The elements of this definition in the *Qur'ân* can be summarized in the following points:

1) Jews and Christians are recognized as the addressees of the Book; but they refused to recognize in return the *Qur'ân* as the ultimate Revelation emanated from the Book.

2) The Book (*Kitâb*) is identified with the *Qur'ân* before it became an O.C.C. (*Mushaf*), and later the *Mushaf* will be assimilated to the Book.

3) Muslims are integrated into the spiritual Community called *Ahl al-Kitâb* in the new definition given in the *Qur'ân*, so that Muslims become the true representatives of *Ahl al-Kitâb*, and *Islâm* is the true religion, the one and only religion of the truth.

4) At the end of the Qur'ânic Revelation (*sûra* IX, Repentance) a

definite separation occurs between Muslims and *Ahl al-Kitâb*, meaning Jews and Christians, who have distorted the Scriptures and who are bound to pay the poll tax: "Fight the ones among those who were given the Book, who do not believe in God nor the Last Day, nor forbid whatever God and His messenger have forbidden, nor profess the True Religion, until they pay the poll tax of their own accord and act submissive". (IX, 29).

This vocabulary will be largely used later in the polemical literature against *Ahl al-Kitâb* and also by the jurists to elaborate the status of the "protected people" (*Ahl al-dhimma*).

5) A more rigid boundary is established between *Ahl al-Kitâb*, who are enlightened with the Knowledge (*'ilm*) delivered in the Book, and the "ignorant people" (*ummiyyûn, jâhiliyya*), who are pagans, not touched at all by the *'ilm*.

Here we meet the yet unconsidered problem of the sacralization and transcendentalization of profane history. Political and social issues particular to groups in a very limited space and time (Medina and Mecca between 612-632) are transferred to a sacred, transcendental level by the verses of the *Qur'ân*. Should we consider this as a current practice of men in society who sublimate ordinary events to show the way to the absolute? Or is it legitimate to come back to the positive history and to demythologize religious history as was attempted by Bultmann and others in the historicist climate of western culture since the 19th century?

The rationality implied by the demythologizing approach is already present in the essay of Ibn Ḥazm (XIth century) on the judaeo-Christian scriptures; the argumentation used by this talented polemist is that still followed by contemporary Muslim polemist who have not absorbed even the philological method of western historians.

The issue of the *tahrîf*, for example, is not yet considered in its two significant outreaches - as a critical history of the texts actually used in Arabia in the seventh century by Jews and Christians, and as the crystallization in the Muslim religious *imaginaire* of the ideal authenticity of scriptures as exemplified exclusively in the *Qur'ân*. The whole image of the *Ahl al-Kitâb*, with all the religious arguments used against them on the central issue of the Book and its authenticity, constitutes in the *Qur'ân* a polemical contribution to corroborate the excellence of the "best Community manifested among men," the true believers who trust the ultimate Revelation made through Muḥammad. The polemic manipulates such ancient religious symbols as prohibitions concerning food, the ritual of circumcision, fasting, collective prayer on Friday (*vs* Shabbat and Sun-

day). This aspect of Revelation can be described as mimetic rivalries (*surenchère mimétique*) operating on the common symbols and myths used in the religious discourse since its Biblical manifestation.

This heavy heritage of representations addressed to the religious *imaginaire* and not yet scientifically assumed, is used in a very obscure and misleading way in the present context of ongoing war in the Middle East and, more generally, between Islam and the West. The greatest "theological" handicap in the Islamic-Christian dialogue is also related to the imagery concerning Jesus, the Gospels bequeathed by the ancient polemical literature.

B - *The societies of the Book*

There is a bulky, illusory knowledge about Revelation. But how can we remove all the representations generated in the past and today, in a context of social struggle for power, to open a free space for critical objective knowledge?

The task of modern scholars is to discover a way to rid ourselves of these long-standing illusions without imposing new illusions in the name of science. For our subject, the concept of *The Societies of the Book* offers a way to rethink the old concept of *Ahl al-Kitâb* without depending on the polemical and so-called theological definitions still prevailing today.

The concept of society refers to all the methodologies and problematics used in the social, political, and human sciences today. Instead of approaching the religious phenomenon in isolation from the other factors operating in each society, we raise two major questions which are more and more considered in a new discipline called the social sciences of religion:

1) How is religion integrated with the main forces that shape each society? In which historical conditions does it become a determining factor of evolution - as in Islam today - and when is it minimized and marginalized?

2) How can we differentiate the phenomenon of the Book from other religious expressions shaping different societies, imposing different rhythms of evolution?

These two questions presuppose or generate many other problems. The most difficult one is perhaps to differentiate *religion* as a body of symbolic, evocative propositions on the human condition, from *ideology* as a conceptual vision claimed by a social group to protect its identity and, eventually, to expand it to other groups. It is, of course, unavoidable that

each religion is manipulated by many social groups transforming it into ideologies. Religion remains an open perspective for possible meanings and actualizations of human existence and coexistence, while ideologies are limited to precarious cultural, economic, political conditions and purposes.

Religion and ideology have some common functions; but they use different tools and open different ways. They both generate the imaginary order and the real order of the society; they both stir up individual and collective hope for a perfect order to come and give an imaginary support to the ethical and political order. But religion refers to the realm of transcendence and strengthens the mystical momentum towards the absolute; ideology leads to the practical, limited order idealized by one group.

According to these statements, religion cannot be opposed only to secularization, as it is so often in Western scholarship. Not only is religion constantly interacting with other forces in all societies, but it is scientifically unacceptable to generalize the special historical evolution of Western societies as a model of explanation and progress for all other societies. We have to consider and analyze systems of historical action in traditional as well as in the so-called secularized societies. Secularized forces are at work in the traditional societies, and traditional or even archaic elements are still alive and influential in the secularized societies.

The complex phenomenon of the Book-book should be reexamined in the light of this view, generalizing the same critical anthropological approach to all types of societal organizations. An attempt at outlining this new anthropological view - not focused, nevertheless, on the phenomenon of the Book-book - has been made recently by G. Balandier, in *Le Detour*, Fayard, 1986. Many studies on the Bible in history have also shown its constant double impact: As a Book inspired by the Holy Spirit it activates in all societies the need and the search for the Absolute; as a written text, it has never ceased to shape the cultural, political, and social dimensions of collective life. On the cultural level, it operates as a *book*, as a text, as a language; on the political level, it has decisive functions as a *corpus*, as *writing* linked to the new states and their ideologies, as *norms* (ethical, juridical, intellectual); on the social level it commands the readings, the groups, the collective *ritual*.

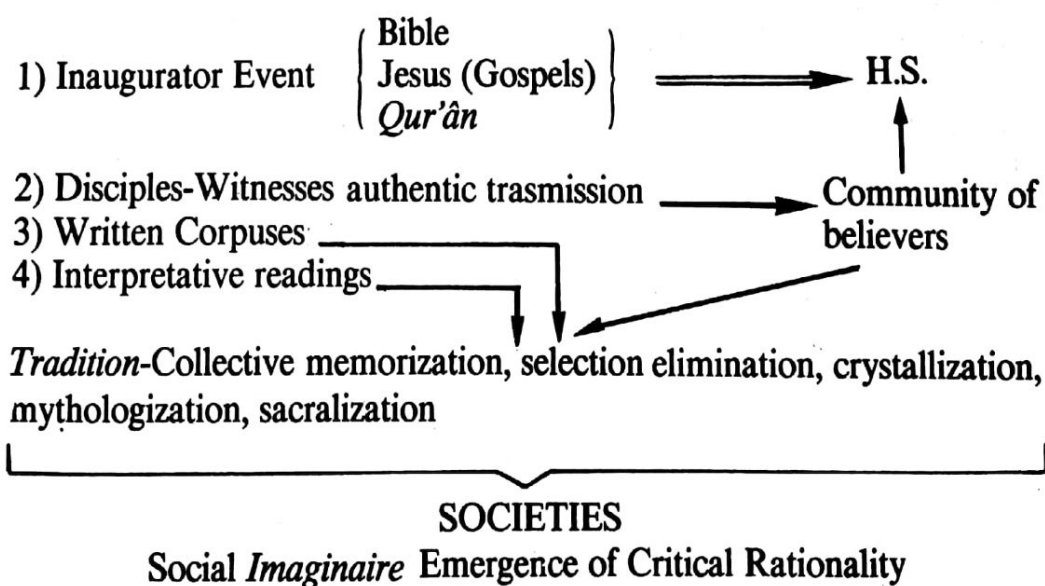
From all these points of view, we have seen that the *Qur'ân* is no different from the Bible; it had and still has the same functions in all the societies in which it is adopted as the last revealed Book. One is then entitled to speak on the societies of the Book-book beyond the theological and ideological distinctions presented by each community of believers as

the divine characteristics of its own Book.

One could object that this historical anthropological perspective on the study of the Book-book in history implies a scientific reduction of the transcendental dimension of the Revelation. Two answers can be proposed to this objection: First, the transcendence claimed in the traditional theological interpretation of the Book is the projection of the religious *imaginaire* back to the inaugurating age of the Revelation. It becomes a psychological, cultural process of transcendentalization, mythologization, sacralization, and ideologization in various, changing, historical conditions. This process is included in the anthropological problematic, not rejected, as it has been by 19th century scientism, outside the true rationality. Second, the rationality used in the theological stage of reason is related more to the collective *imaginaire* than to the critical reason, the theological reason is unable to recognize that it produces *imaginaire* rather than rationality.

On the contrary, critical reason engaged in the study of the societies of the Book knows the distinction between *imaginaire* and rationality; it integrates both in the same project of intelligibility, without reducing one to the other on an illusory basis. From this exercise emerges a new rationality which avoids the prejudices of the secularized positivist or polemical model, as well as the so-called spiritual, divine, or transcendental model.

The system of production of the societies of the Book and the level of analysis required in the perspective described above are shown in the following diagram:



Not one of the monotheistic communities has yet fully reached this type of critical reason applied even to the latest modernity. There are, of course, differences of development and attitudes between theological reasons in its Jewish and Muslim positions are heavily conditioned by the tragic issue of the State of Israel; Christians are more effectively challenged by the achievements of scientific, technological, and political modernity, although theological thought has not yet succeeded in integrating and going beyond the positive aspects of secularization.

Concerning the *Qur'ân* as a linguistic, historical, and anthropological case study of the phenomenon of Revelation, we are bound to stress the fact that both secularized scholarship and theological reason as they are practiced in the West fall far short of the new rationality. The *Qur'ân* is still described from outside as the Book specific to Muslims; occasional influences of the Bible are enumerated according to the historicist linear vision; problems of authenticity according to the philological history of texts are also raised (cf. Th. Nöldeke: *Geschichte des Qorans*). In a few cases - i.e., like Watt, W.C. Smith, and Cragg - Revelation in the *Qur'ân* is recognized in a spiritual ecumenical perspective which implies all the epistemological presuppositions of the classical theological reason.

Islam, on its side, is too much engaged in the revolutionary struggle against the West to tolerate any concession to a critical approach of its orthodox tradition. This tradition is used as a refuge, as a springboard for political combat, as a base for opposition to the local regimes. Muslim societies are thus dominated by the traditional religious *imaginaire* which is very effective in political struggles, but is also a great obstacle to movement towards the new rationality. Patience, persistence, and time are needed in order to break through the unavoidable barriers inherited from the past and the new obstacles created by the so-called modern economic and political "order". We all face the same challenge: We must find a way to initiate the new semantic and symbolic practice required by the 21st century.

* This is the enlarged text of a lecture delivered on March 11, 1987 at Claremont Graduate School as the 2nd biannual Blaisdell Lecture. I thank my friend Professor John Hick who made this event possible.

- (1) cf. my *Lectures du Coran*, Alif - Les Editions de la Méditerranée - Tunis - 1991.
- (2) cf. M. ARKOUN, "Peut-on parler de merveilleux dans le Coran ?" in : *Lectures*, 87-144.
- (3) Except, of course, by philosophers who have allegorized the Qur'anic discourse, without defining a better theory of metaphor. This point needs a special inquiry.
- (4) cf. "Lecture de la Sourate 18", in : *Lectures*, 69-86.
- (5) cf. M. ARKOUN, *L'humanisme arabe au IVe/Xe siècle*, J. VRIN, Paris 2nd. éd. 1982.
- (6) On this notion cf. EI s.v.